

Dvar Torah B'har B'Chukotai. Delivered at Minyan Ma'at, Ansche Chesed Synagogue

Good Shabbos! Since I was a little girl, I've always been fascinated by Shmittah. The idea that there was a seventh year where even the world rests, where debts are forgiven, and where it's a massive Shabbat for the planet was always something that excited me. I always wondered why people didn't really grab hold of the idea and why I never quite knew when the Shmittah year occurred. Or if I did know, nothing much seemed to happen on that year.

So I was so grateful to Hazon, and to Nigel Savage in particular, for making a big deal of the Shmittah year, FINALLY... for getting people in this country to actually take notice (or SOME PEOPLE...), and I was so excited to hear that the Israeli gov't was actually doing some Shmittah things beyond letting the land lie fallow: the debt release program initiated by xxxxx... etc.

I actually considered just doing a book report on the most amazing book of the year, the translation and intro to Shabbat Ha'Aretz: Rav Kook, by Julian Sinclair (and edited by Elisheva. Honestly, I could read that book word for word up here for one straight hour and you would all say it was the best dvar torah ever. It is SO beautiful. In the book, Rav Kook explained why he was not in favor of the Heter Mechirah... selling off parts of the land to non-Jews so we didn't have to actually let any land lie fallow. But in Rav Kook's intro, he also dealt with what Sinclair calls The Aggadah of Shmittah, the ideas and central values that are laden within Shmittah.

1. Shmittah is for the community what Shabbat is for the individual.
2. An expression of the interconnection between people and land. (closer to American prophet of agrarianism, Wendell Berry, than to Gush Emunim. Rav Kook kissed the stones of Israel, cried as he planted a sapling tree, and gleefully rode in a hayride as he visited the village of Merhavia. Wendell Berry: "I don't think it is appreciated how much of an outdoor book the Bible is." Or in another place: "we are living as neighbors here, human and plant and animal, are part of one another, and so cannot possibly flourish alone...")
3. In the Shmittah, treat food as food and not as a commodity. וְהִיְתָה שְׂפַת הָאָרֶץ לְאֹכְלָהּ, לָכֶם, "for you to eat, but not for your trade."
4. Shmittah as a year of human health. Will not need healing for sicknesses which mostly befall us when the balance of life is destroyed and our lives are distanced from the rhythms of nature.
5. Shmittah and the Jubilee are interconnected rhythms and structures. Holiness grows through these spans of time.
6. Jubilee as a year of truth and reconciliation. Year of forgiveness that rectifies the injustices of the past.
7. Jubilee as a universal principle. Ger Toshav, radical acceptance of the other, economic reform.

I find these ideas incredibly moving, and I decided I wanted to join in. I gave a RH sermon about the importance of protecting the land, how I saw environmental action as a *chesed shel emet*, in some ways, since—despite the lesson of Choni Hame'agel who met the guy planting a carob tree that in 70 years, someone might benefit from my action, I myself would never actually FEEL the results of my actions. And I made some commitments for myself: 1) that I would recycle more, compost my leftover food, and reduce my use of plastic bags, ATM receipts, and other nonessentials, and 2) that I was going to let two things in my life lie fallow: my pantry (I would try to use the dried mushrooms and cans of beans in my pantry before buying any new items)... and my closet. I would try to wear only the things I already had and not accumulate any new stuff until next Rosh Hashanah.

Neither of these goals has been met. This skirt is new. I actually did it for a while, but then it slowly started to weaken. At first I decided that if I had a gift card or CREDIT, I could use it (right? That's still using OLD things...), then I went with "oh, this is an actual NEED" because X just ripped, and finally, very recently, in fact, I just let loose and bought a couple of things.

This is one hundred percent a luxury problem... and in some way, it feels ridiculous to be talking about this when a second earthquake in Nepal is making some of the world's poorest, most marginalized populations even poorer and more marginalized. But I believe it's important for us to talk about.

Of course, part of this is the problem with resolutions. Just because I WANT to do something doesn't mean I WILL do it. This is true in a million different areas of life.

But I also think—and this is the more interesting part for OUR purposes—that there is something about my failure to let my food cabinets or my closet lie fallow that gets at my—and I am guessing many of our—addiction to CONSUMPTION.

It turns out there is something HARD about letting things lie fallow. There's something that draws me—and maybe all of us—to the NEW. Those beans in my pantry? I'd rather have something new for dinner. That pair of pants? Eh, I could do better.

What is that about? What is it that makes us always want the next new thing?

For one thing, we live in a city, in a country, where DESIRE is in every step. As I once heard someone say: you walk outside in NYC and all of a sudden you NEED a new toaster. A lot of it is in the marketing...there was an article about Gilt Group and internet flash sales that suggested that they are a new retail model which links consumption with FEAR. It's actually a term: Panic buying. In conversation with Adweek, co-founder Alexis Maybank professed: "*The retail model really was changed in the Gilt formula, which was act now, move quickly. We don't have everything for everyone.*"

I want to be above this... I want to be able to say these aren't my values, but it's really hard to resist. I actually believe it is a human need to WANT want want. And that's where Shmittah comes in. The Torah seems to recognize that it's harder than it sounds. There's an acknowledgement of FEAR... FOMO, of the TERROR of not having enough.

וְכִי תֹאמְרוּ, מִה-נֹאכֵל בַּשָּׁנָה הַשְּׁבִיעִת: הֵן לֹא נִזְרַע, וְלֹא נֶאֱסָף
אֶת-הַתְּבוּאָתֵינוּ.

וְצוֹיָתִי אֶת-בִּרְכָּתִי לָכֶם, בַּשָּׁנָה הַשְּׁשִׁית; וְעַשָּׂתָּ, אֶת-הַתְּבוּאָה, לְשִׁלֹּשׁ,
הַשָּׁנִים

So much of our inability to sit and wait, and NOT consume, comes down to fear. What if there's not enough? What if I miss out? Or, perhaps worse, the desire is about a fear of just sitting still... a fear of not living big enough.

I want to add an eighth value to Rav Kook's list. An eighth reason we need Shmittah. Shmittah gives us a chance to look at our "needs" and our desires in a whole new way.

For me, it is about faith. TRUST.

Rabin Mishnah Study Group of the Beit Midrash Virtuali: "Shemittah" means "relinquishing", "abandoning", "letting go". We know, even if we do keep getting new stuff, it doesn't actually HELP... it doesn't actually get rid of the fear. As Pema Chodron, Buddhist monk teaches, the ground is ALWAYS shaky under our feet, even when we think it is safe, the rug is always about to be pulled out. We try to tamp down the fear with stuff, with a new this or a new that. But it doesn't really work for more than a moment in time.

Ultimately, nothing is ours ANYWAY... וְהָאֶרֶץ, לֹא תִמָּכַר לְצִמְתָּת--כִּי-לִי,

הָאֶרֶץ practice of non-attachment.

As far as I can tell, the ONLY fix that works is FAITH. Trusting that it will be okay, that the next three years will be okay, that the manna will come again tomorrow. Even if it DOESN'T, even if we're wrong, it makes TODAY a lot better when we live with that kind of faith.

We need HELP with that. Sabeinu Mituvecha... We need HELP to be satisfied. We need PRACTICE. As Dorothy said, "it's good pedagogy." Once a week, we PRACTICE for the Shmittah year. We practice not needing anything.

There's still time... Shmittah continues through NEXT RH. It seems to me it's like the opposite of counting the Omer, where if you mess up once you're out for the count. Shabbat is a taste of ETERNITY, and Shmittah, then, is even bigger. Shmittah tells us, there's more time, it's okay, you can try again. There will always be enough... and we still have opportunities to let go MORE.

I'm starting again... and recommitting. And I'm practicing right now, as we speak. Shabbat Shalom.